

NTSB takes unusual step to address plane crash

By Alan Levin, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The National Transportation Safety Board issued a scathing report Wednesday that blamed a fatal plane crash last year near the Bahamas on a small airline's bad maintenance and a series of mistakes by the pilot.

The five NTSB members said they were so troubled by the accident and the numerous errors that led to it that they took the unusual step of ordering staff investigators to develop additional safety recommendations to improve oversight of airlines.

"This is just outrageous," Chairman Ellen Engleman Connors said. "This accident should not have happened."

Diane Parker-Diaz, 33, of Jacksonville, Fla., and her 4-year-old niece, Diante Wayna Parker, drowned after the small propeller plane ditched in the ocean on July 13, 2003, near the Abaco chain of islands in the Bahamas.

Seven other passengers and the pilot bobbed in the water for 90 minutes until they were rescued by the Coast Guard.

Three of the survivors were children, including Parker-Diaz's son and daughter. One married couple held their 15-month-old girl above their heads until rescued, according to NTSB interviews of survivors.

Air Sunshine Flight 527 from Fort Lauderdale to Treasure Cay, Bahamas, was routine until the right engine blew up as the twin-engine Cessna 402C neared its destination.

The plane, which holds nine passengers, is designed to fly with one engine. But the pilot could not maintain altitude and hit the water several miles from shore.

The NTSB blamed the crash and the deaths on several factors:

- Air Sunshine maintenance workers improperly repaired the engine. The airline had no record of the repair, which is a violation of federal aviation regulations. At least some of the work had been done by an assistant mechanic who had never done such repairs before.
- The pilot, identified in news reports as Hassan Moslemi, 45, of Fort Lauderdale, did not follow proper procedures for flying a plane after an engine failure. As a result, the plane could not maintain enough speed to stay aloft.
- Moslemi also did not tell passengers to grab the life preservers that were stowed under each seat. Only four of the inflatable vests from the plane were used. Because Moslemi had failed to wear his shoulder harness, he struck his head when the plane hit the water and could not help the passengers escape.

The NTSB found that Moslemi had failed nine flight tests with Federal Aviation Administration inspectors before finally passing. He also had been dismissed from a cargo airline because he could not complete his training, investigators found.

"We don't believe this pilot was very well qualified or had the skills," said John Clark, the NTSB's chief aviation investigator.

Officials from Air Sunshine did not return calls for comment. The airline has six small planes and flies between Florida, several Bahamas locations and Puerto Rico.

The NTSB issued one safety recommendation calling for the FAA to remind pilots on small planes to assist passengers in an emergency. The NTSB investigates accidents but can only recommend safety improvements.

Safety board members said more needed to be done. They ordered the staff to draft additional recommendations within 60 days.

Several board members said that they were concerned that FAA inspectors did not turn up the problems discovered in the investigation. An FAA spokesman declined to comment until the recommendations are released.

Airlines such as Air Sunshine that fly planes with fewer than 10 seats receive slightly less extensive oversight than do large airlines.

Planes inspected for potentially dangerous scratches

WASHINGTON (AP) — Boeing, working with federal safety officials, is investigating tiny scratches on some older model planes to see if they are evidence of a potentially dangerous problem with the jets' outer shells.

The scratches, or scribe marks, occur when a plane is prepared for repainting, said Boeing spokesman Jim Proulx. Workers scrape off a sealant used on the joints that hold together sections of the aircraft's aluminum skin, he said.

The scribe marks can lead to deeper cracks that can spread, potentially leading to an uncontrolled decompression that can strip off pieces of the skin, according to an FAA safety bulletin issued late last year.

Proulx said Boeing will issue a bulletin to airlines later this year telling them to inspect planes once they've taken off and landed about 4,500 times after being repainted. An inspection involves taking the paint off along the joints to make sure there isn't any scribing, he said.

The Federal Aviation Administration is considering following up with an order to inspect repainted planes and to repair them if cracks are found, said agency spokeswoman Diane Spitaliere.

The problem came to light during routine maintenance last October, Spitaliere said. Inspections began on about 80 aging jetliners that had been painted in the past few years, she said. Only two have been found to have cracks.

About 60 Boeing planes have been found to have scribe marks, Proulx said. The vast majority are 737s, the world's most popular plane with about 2,800 in service. The 737s tend to be older — and to have been repainted more often — than other aircraft.

Also found to have the scribe marks were a few 747s, one 757 and one 767, Proulx said. The carriers themselves conducted most of the inspections.

Planes found with scribe marks were permitted back in service, but they must be inspected every 250 flight hours to make sure the scratches don't become cracks, Spitaliere said. For the hardworking 737, that works out to about once a month.

FAA spokesman Les Dorr said the agency, the airlines and Boeing formed working groups in February that meet every six weeks and hold a weekly conference call to discuss the issue.

"Everybody's been put on notice to look for these things," Dorr said.

The FAA has also ordered airlines to repaint airplanes at maintenance facilities where they will receive close scrutiny.

"This is a good example of how the safety system works," Spitaliere said.

United gets more time for maintenance

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

As United Airlines closes two airplane maintenance centers to save money, it is getting an extra year to do required major maintenance on at least a fifth of its jets.

United, which is in bankruptcy reorganization, says the Federal Aviation Administration has agreed to let the airline do "heavy maintenance" checks on its 97 Boeing 757s once every six years instead of five.

United, the FAA and some aviation experts say that such extensions are common and won't affect safety. United says its 757 policy matches industry guidelines. Boeing says those call for the heaviest maintenance checks after 12,000 flights or six years, whichever comes first.

Other experts say the move will make the jets less safe.

Heavy maintenance involves major overhauls. Seats and hundreds of interior panels are removed, and a jet's structure is inspected for corrosion and fatigue. Some components are replaced.

United says less-intensive procedures called "C checks" were also changed this month for the 757s, from every 500 days to 540 days. The airline says it has in the past extended maintenance intervals for other types of jets.

United recently closed its Indianapolis maintenance base and will close its Oakland facility by May 31. It plans to outsource much of its maintenance work to private contractors.

The FAA refuses to provide any details about United's heavy maintenance extension or those of other airlines. Such extensions must meet "strict, established FAA procedures," the agency says.

"Safety is the No. 1 factor" in considering extension requests, FAA spokesman Paul Takemoto says. "If there is any reason to suspect that safety might be compromised, the extension is not granted."

A maintenance extension was cited as a contributor in an Alaska Airlines crash in 2000, which killed 88 people. The National Transportation Safety Board said the accident was probably caused by the airline's failure to properly check and lubricate a part in the jet's tail. The FAA had approved Alaska's request to check that mechanism less frequently.

United officials say they constantly monitor their planes' maintenance and performance. Cost cutting was not a factor in extending the time limit, spokesman Chris Brathwaite says.

Hank Krakowski, a United vice president, says it's "a good business practice" to not waste company money by performing maintenance tasks too soon.

Some experts believe cost is an overriding concern. "Whenever you extend an interval, that can't be a good thing," says Mike Overly of the Aviation Safety Institute, a non-profit research center. "It sounds like a bottom-line move to stay afloat."

Mike Metcalf, president of the International Society of Transport Aircraft Trading, says airlines seek extensions "clearly for cost reasons."

Metcalf, whose group's members work for airlines, manufacturers and aircraft lessors, says that "planes have a tremendous amount of safety built in" and that a one-year heavy maintenance extension "does not have a huge safety implication." But doing maintenance "sooner is better than later."

The average age of United's 757s is 11 years.